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## **SEMIOTIC THINKING FOR MARKETERS**

**(Paper)**

### **1. A Brief Introduction**

I was inspired for this paper by a subject mentioned in one of the discussions last year in London concerning specific language in marketing and branding. It was about the metaphors marketers use in connection with the key notions and situations in their work. In experience I have recently had, I have met predominant use of maritime and naval based figures of speech obviously provoked by the lack of concrete words and expressions in everyday talk. This paper includes some examples from different sources which prove the thesis that there is something very important in the comparison between market and business behavior, on one hand, and our perceptions about the sea/ocean and various objects we use to control this element of the Nature, on the other. Usually we turn to familiar things to explain unfamiliar (new or strange) things in our immediate environment rather than inventing new notions and words. If we can not, metaphors come in the stage. ‘Metaphor’ means ‘transfer’, ‘carry-over’ of meaning; it’s one of the most interesting and sophisticated mechanisms in language, but it can “say” a lot about culture and mental construction:

- ‘Metaphor is the application of a word that does not belong: either from the genus to the species, or from the species to the genus, or from the species to the species, of according to what is analogues.’ (Aristotle, *Poetics* XXI, in Müller 2008: 27).

▪ It ‘transposes the qualities of one object to a dissimilar object by way of implied comparison, crossing strata of reality through imaginative association...’ (Mick 1986: 206).

▪ ‘*The essence of metaphor is under-standing and experiencing one kind of think in terms of another. (...) ... metaphor is not just matter of language, that is, of mere words. We shall argue that, on the contrary, human thought processes are largely metaphorical. That is what we mean when we say that the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined. Metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person’s conceptual system.*’ (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 5-6; italic’s in quotation).

In general, market(ing) specialists pretend to know a lot about the attitude of mind and behavior of the competitors and consumers. The most part of the audience here is in marketing research or management business and people know that in the name of the objectivity of the research projects in focus groups and in-dept interviews marketers or similar professionals are not allowed to participate. Thus, paradoxically, marketers are always on the ‘scientific’ side of the mirror in the discussion room, observing the respondents’ answers and reactions, but whether they themselves are truly familiar with their own way of thinking?

### 1.1 How Do We Think?

There is something crucial I’d like to remind, it’s the famous aphorism “Know thyself”, written in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo in the town of Delphi. Provided from the Great Oracle and transmitted by Socrates and his students, it has huge effect in the whole Greek philosophical tradition, humanities and especially in psychology, and why not in marketing since, in fact, the latter is a part of social sciences to certain extend? And may be namely here is the strength of semiotics – helping us not exactly to know how the others achieve order in the world and create meaning, but mostly how we ourselves do this, because we are part of particular culture even if we are talking about the endless dialogue between market experts and consumers constructing consumption culture.

Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff wrote: “We can accept, with most philosophers, linguists, and psychologists that the human mind has an inherent tendency to impose order upon the chaos of its environment by classifying its contents, and without this classification knowledge of the world and adjustment to it would not be possible. Culture serves the mind by imposing a collectively shared cognitive order upon the world which, objectively, is totally heterogeneous and presents endless array of singular things. Culture achieves order by carving out, through discrimination and classification, distinct areas of homogeneity within the overall heterogeneity.” (1986: 70).

### 1.2 ZMET

In early 90's American professor Gerald Zaltman developed the so called *Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique*. His approach is based on the conviction that consumers think in metaphors and projective techniques accompanied with long in-depth interview, not the discussion groups, are the only successful method for extracting the mental pattern in given product category. The recruited respondents are asked to collect various pictures on what the given brand means to them, using different pieces they are able to find – their personal photographs, newspaper and/or magazine clipping, or other sources. Then, after a week they visit the researcher for the interview and explain to him/her everything in details about the amount of images – pointing most representative picture, sorting pictures in meaningful groups, putting the oppositions, putting images together in vignette and so on. The goal is the nonverbal channels of communication to be used in surfacing mental models which are driving forces in consumer thinking and behavior (Keller 1998: 317). Zaltman himself points some main groups of metaphors we usually use – such as balance, journey, container... (Zaltman & Zaltman 2008). The output of the ZMET, after working up process, is a consensus map, which involves the most important constructs relevant for the brand or product under study.

In the case of marketers attitude, a small introspection is never useless, but for this purpose we don't really need focus groups, because we have quite a lot secondary examples in order to see that maritime/naval metaphors dominate the thinking schema and the paper will try to answer why.

## 2. Naval Metaphors

### 2.1 Compass

Firstly, let's start with the compass. Our actual host in Semiofest 2013– Gabriela uses an image of a compass on her agency site – 'Semioticastudio' and real compass instead of logo since she believes that semiotic approach offers as navigation in the world of market which is full with signs, messages, habits, beliefs, and consumption contexts. The same device we find on the official site of 'Innovaro', which is company using software and social media mining in order to offer to its clients innovative decisions and insights for the purpose of their business growth and tries to foresee how the markets will develop in the future.

### 2.2 Flagship

Rarely, but not accidentally, marketers turn to the parallel between the leading ship of the armada known as 'flagship' and the best product or brand they operate with. Such goods and brands, for instance, are the oldest and very famous Nivea cream, the Apple iPhone currently, the VW 'Beatle' model, which has been revived a couple of times already, or 'Air Max' training shoes of Nike, just to name a few. Therefore, 'flagship' is an important term and an important business tool helping companies to maintain their presence and awareness in

consumer mind, reducing costs of their communication efforts; it also indicates that company's portfolio is not a simple inventory but materialized business strategy not so different than the (military) naval one which we know from history. There's nothing surprising in it because since Ancient times business as a whole has been perceived as variety of war, despite of the fact that its rules change it is still a war.

### 2.3 Lighthouse

Further, we come across on lighthouse. It's the metaphor I like the most because it's rich of meaning and avoids using the sea directly but presupposes it. We'll discuss 'sea' *per se* down further.

I'm embracing an opportunity that we are in Spain now and will mention one of my favorite local brands – Camper – it's actually a global shoe brand with very interesting product and communication strategy I love to refer to before my students. Camper has a TV ad that says literally this: 'Challenging brand are build upon solid believe system. They have a point of view about the world, they project like a lighthouse for all to see and navigate by...'. 'Lighthouse' is stable but not passive object, it could be seen from the sea and in the same time has its own 'light' to show the (right) path to the consumer wandering about into the market full with offers.

Another curious spot belongs to the Axe brand philosophy ('Axe' is deodorant brand owned by Dutch-American company 'Unilever') which is named 'Axe and Lighthouse Identity'. The voiceover belongs to Kevin George – General Division Manager, who argues for the crucial role of 'lighthouse identity' since 'brand for everyone is brand for no one'.

### 2.4 Anchor

Next interesting metaphor is 'anchor'. In Christian religious tradition it represents 'hope'. Why is that? First and foremost because of stability I think. It's very rich metaphor then. We could meet it in terms of brand identity – the first and leading argument for defining what particular brand stands for in the market. 'Anchor' is a point around which every marketing activity should circulate. In history a lot of brands left their anchors searching for new product extensions, new markets or segments, but for many of them this was deadly pace and they don't exist any longer since their consumers lost the reason to chose their offers. My examples here are from the same Axe ad I've just referred to where 'anchor point' is used as a synonym for 'positioning statement' which managers must sustain, and from David Aaker's respectable work 'Building Strong Brands', illustrating what keeps McDonald's brand together on the bottom of management, despite of multitude of various associations which average consumer could 'see' on the surface – 'kids', 'Ronald', 'efficient', etc.

### 2.5 Sea/Ocean

Talking about naval metaphors it's easy for us to recognize the common denominator in this amount of associations – this is sea or ocean. The meaning not the size is what matter. There is already an answer, however, to the question 'Why sea/ocean?'. It's in the business bestseller 'Blue Ocean Strategy' by INSEAD professors – W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne. They define 'ocean' as a 'market space', where 'blue ocean' is an untapped by the existing boundaries market or market niche, which creates new demand and offers almost limitless opportunities for profitable growth. The 'red ocean', in contrast, is long time existing, bloody and crowded market with immovable rules and the only way to make profit in it is to steal somehow market share from the competition (2005: 4-5).

We witness how fast Internet - just like markets – grows. Nowadays it has depth and breadth which are immense and incomprehensible, that's why it also is represented as ocean. We also need 'ship', i.e. searching software, and stable points to be able to navigate through the Web and to take advantage from it.

In addition, I'd like to quote Grand McCracken who points out in his famous work "Culture and Consumption" that we should not think of brand meaning in terms of individual personalities as most of the specialists do, but rather as 'bundles' or 'buckets' of meaning, 'aggregations more that associations' (2005: 184). Obviously, he intentionally changes the 'brand as a person' metaphor – very popular among the marketers - with the 'container metaphor', as Gerald Zaltman would say, where brand is presented as a fluid substance that we sometimes hardly manage to collect in one utensil.

About a year ago, without any intentional reference to naval metaphors used elsewhere, I decided to illustrate my version of 'brand equity' concept in an article, dedicated on particular research on local mobile providers, by means of anchor, ships, and sea. It seemed 'natural' to me and I briefed one of my best students to make this image, stressing on the stability of anchor for the brand identity and strategy, and on the potential which each brand has for its further development – both horizontally and vertically. The 'rope' between the anchor and ship was similar to navel string and represented what we knew like 'brand meaning management' or 'brand equity management'. Obviously, the diagram was nothing new but the product of my education in marketing and branding continuing the idea for all I've just presented.

### 3. The 'Agony of Choice'.

Thus, continuing the 'ocean' metaphor topic in terms of marketing, we should remind that it doesn't represent 'empty space' but 'filled to capacity' with offers. The American professor Arthur A. Berger described the contemporary situation in consumption culture in this way: "Consider blue jeans, for example. There are now many different kinds of blue jeans that are available and brands which compete with one another. There are tight-fitting ones, loose-

fitting ones, lined ones, acid-washed ones, faded-ones, torn-ones, deep Indigo ones, low waist ones and now high waist ones, and so on. This means consumers desiring to buy a pair of blue jeans now have to consider any number of different brands and stylistic possibilities within each brand, leading in some cases to what might be described as the “agony of choice” (2010: 177). In the Academy awarded movie “The Hurt Locker” we can see the ‘agony’ in particular scene. The main character, sergeant William James (starring Jeremy Renner), is a team leader of bomb disposal unit in Iraq using maverick methods in bomb dismantlement and takes very risky decisions, but when he comes back in the U.S., his wife puts him in even more ‘sophisticated’ situation - to choose cereals for their child all alone. It’s not matter of life and death, but he finds himself stuck in the middle between so many offers (brands) for an ordinary food. After 5 seconds of hesitation he just picks a package from the shelf in front of him.

#### 4. Conclusions.

As a conclusion we need a kind of explanation what all this does mean. In the beginning of the last world economic crisis a bank in Bulgaria cleverly mentioned in an advertisement that the Chinese word for ‘crisis’ also means ‘opportunity’. The same we could say about ‘ocean’ metaphor for ‘market’. It’s double faced idea – sea/ocean is almost endless and even hard to be embraced by a single mind but in the same time it could be conquered and may be somewhere beyond it there are new shores. If we look back in history, we could see that while Atlantic Ocean scared European population in 15<sup>th</sup> century, Columbus saw good chance to reach India faster. But in such an initiative we need a map or compass, and that’s why marketing research and applied semiotics always offer positioning, consensus or conceptual map demonstrating where one brand is within the market limits taking into consideration consumer perception about the meaning of this market and the position of the competitors. About mapping in terms of relationship between culture and economy Michael Blim wrote: ‘The relationships among values, goals and actions are reciprocal. Considerations of a goal or action invoke our values, and vice versa. All three change as the conditions of our lives change. Thus, values are not some fixed essence, like the North Star, by which we guide ourselves. They are more like maps we use crossing the rough and changing terrain of everyday living. Embodied in actions, they comprise culture’ (2005: 306).

Finally, metaphors like ‘anchor’, ‘compass’ and ‘lighthouse’ represent the efforts of marketers and market researchers to set the very complex market space in order and to shed light on the role of brand in the contemporary markets. Markets are interesting and dynamic but there is no manager who could achieve success and loyalty without use stable points which could distinguish one brand and serve for orientation for audience. The dynamics of the market always outstrips consumers’ abilities to understand it.

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